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ABSTRACT

This report describes an evaluation of Project Success, a dropout prevention program at Crockett High School in Austin (Texas). The class centered program provided incentives for improved educational performance and attendance of at-risk ninth-grade students in the 1990-91 school year. The project served 103 students over the fall 1990 and spring 1991 semesters. The evaluation includes comparison of program participants with a similar group at another school. The evaluation produced the following major findings: (1) participants had a dropout rate of 6.8 percent, which is lower than the comparison group; (2) the project did not have a positive impact on achievement because participants did not achieve predicted test score gains; (3) participants' attendance rates declined from the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year, however, the extent of the decrease was less for the participants than for the comparison students; (4) it was not possible to determine the impact of the incentives on students' attendance and achievement; and (5) teachers perceived conference attendance, planning periods, and smaller class size as fringe benefits rather than performance incentives. Statistical data are provided in two figures. (JB)

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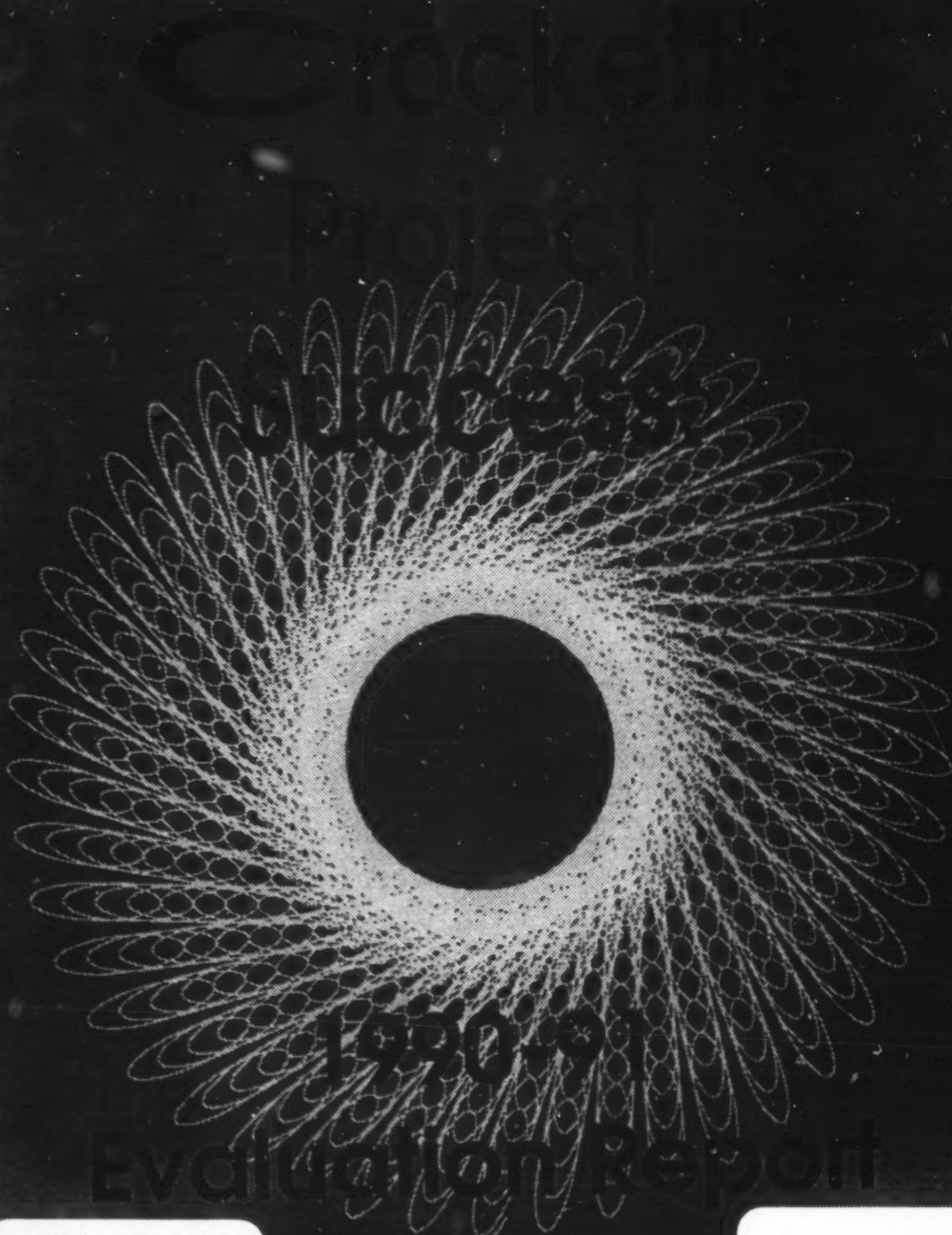

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Austin Independent School District
Department of Management Information
Office of Research and Evaluation

Crockett's Project Success: 1990-91 Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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Program Description

The Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching (FIRST) grant project was a dropout prevention program at Crockett High School called Project Success. The program provided incentives for improved educational performance and attendance of at-risk ninth-grade students. The program was classroom centered. Curriculum was adjusted to fit the special needs of the students. Some teachers provided extra tutoring for the students. Teachers involved in the project were given incentives including a common collegial planning period and paid school leave to attend conferences. The project served 103 students over the fall, 1990 and spring, 1991 semesters.

To assess the effectiveness of the program in terms of student performance, FIRST students were compared to similar students at Crockett and to a comparison group at another District high school to see if the FIRST students' performance improved over time and/or in relation to a comparison group. Information on at-risk Crockett ninth graders for 1988-89 through 1990-91 is also included.

Major Findings

1. FIRST students had a dropout rate of 6.8%, lower than the dropout rate for other at-risk students at Crockett and the comparison group. Participation in the FIRST project appears to have had a positive impact on student dropout rates (pages 4-5).

2. The FIRST project did not have a positive impact on achievement because these students did not achieve predicted test score gains. FIRST students scored below predicted levels on all TAP subtests; however, they did gain at least one year on all subtests except Language (pages 6-7).

3. FIRST students' attendance rates declined from the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year. However, the extent of the decrease was less for the FIRST students than for the comparison students (page 5).

4. Students were given incentives for achievement and attendance at the end of the fall, 1990 semester and at the end of each six weeks during the spring, 1991 semester. Because of other aspects of the FIRST program, the impact of the incentives on students' attendance and achievement cannot be determined (pages 1-2).

5. Teachers perceived conference attendance, planning periods, and smaller class size as fringe benefits rather than performance incentives (page 2).

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Crockett's Project Success: 1990-91 Evaluation Report
Final Report

INTRODUCTION

The Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching (FIRST) grant project, "Restructuring for Student Success: A Dropout Prevention Model," was a dropout prevention program at Crockett High School. Called Project Success at Crockett, the program was designed to provide incentives for improved educational performance and attendance of at-risk students entering the ninth grade as well as for improved performance of teachers in the project. Teachers and administrators developed a plan for restructuring the educational program to better meet the needs of at-risk students. The plan was designed to involve teachers, parents, and administrators in the development and implementation of the program. Rather than fragmenting services by providing assistance outside the regular classroom or building, the program provided students with additional supportive services in the regular classroom. Incentives for students, such as material objects and special awards days, were provided both for improved attendance and academic achievement. Incentives for teachers, such as a common collegial planning period, paid school leave to attend conferences, funds for consultant fees for pertinent at-risk inservice topics, funds to purchase supplementary teaching materials, awards, and gifts of travel, were also available. The project served 103 students over the fall, 1990 and spring, 1991 semesters.

Crockett High School committed the following staff:

- o Four full-time teachers,
- o Two vocational teachers,
- o Two part-time teacher aides,
- o A part-time parent intervention specialist,
- o A grade level counselor,
- o A grade level assistant principal, and
- o A Communities in Schools social worker.

INCENTIVES

Student Incentives

Students were given incentives both for attendance and achievement. During the fall, 1990 semester students earning all A's were awarded a $100 savings bond. In addition, students earning all A's and B's received a $50 savings bond. Students also received a $50 savings

bond for having perfect attendance. During the spring, 1991 semester these same incentives were awarded at the end of each six-week period. A total of 30 students received attendance and achievement awards in the spring semester.

In addition to the larger awards, students were given incentives at the discretion of the individual teacher. These included:

- o Field trips,
- o Free time,
- o Sessions on basketball, cosmetology, and handbells,
- o Extra credit, and
- o Small gift certificates.

Students were given these incentives on a schedule determined by each teacher. It was hoped that these incentives would motivate the students both to attend school and to achieve in their studies. Whether the incentives alone served this goal cannot be determined. Because the FIRST program offered a number of special services to the students, in the absence of a controlled study in which the various services were given or withheld from different groups, it is not possible to determine which part or combination of parts had an impact on student performance.

Teacher Incentives

Plans were to offer teachers incentives based on the improved performance of their students. However, when interviewed, only two of six teachers indicated that they had received incentives. **The conference attendance, planning periods, and smaller class size seemed to be perceived as fringe benefits rather than performance incentives**. Perhaps in future years teacher incentives could be improved and a more direct link between student performance and teacher rewards established. However, none of the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the current system. One indicated that the incentive was the improved performance of the students.

COMPUTER USE

The project purchased five computers and additional software to assist students in the four basic subject areas: language arts/reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. These new computers were set up in the regular classroom instead of a separate lab. Another lab provided by Communities in Schools was accessible during the entire school year for all teachers.

Teachers were asked in interviews during February and March, 1991, to indicate how often students used the computers. Most (4) indicated either that there was no set schedule for student use or that software was not yet available. One teacher indicated that computers were used in the classroom two days a week for 20 minutes each day for a total of 40 minutes a week.

CURRICULUM ADJUSTMENT

Teachers, when interviewed, indicated a variety of ways the curriculum was adjusted to meet the needs of FIRST students. All indicated that they did not rely on the textbook or that they modified its use. Teachers also reported that students had different needs that the teachers tried to be aware of and meet. Teachers used real-world examples and fewer visual materials. One teacher offered tutoring before classes; another used the aide to help students who lagged behind. The major theme in curriculum adjustment was listening to the needs of the students and giving them extra attention.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

An effort was made to involve parents of FIRST students in the education of their children. Teachers and teacher aides called parents and related both positive and negative aspects of the FIRST students' academic performance and behavior. Parents were also contacted if students were absent. A "Back to School" night was held at the beginning of the year to acquaint parents with the program and introduce them to the teachers. At the end of each semester an awards assembly or banquet was held for FIRST students and their parents. Nearly all of the parents attended the banquet in the spring and contributed food. When interviewed, the six teachers indicated that parents were either somewhat (2) or a little bit (4) involved in the project.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON MEASURES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

In order to assess the effectiveness of the program in terms of student performance, FIRST students were compared to similar students at Crockett and at another District high school to see if the FIRST students' performance improved over time and/or in relation to a comparison group. The program had a dual goal of improving both the academic performance of the students and improving their attendance and dropout rates. According to staff interviewed, for the purposes of the program, improved attendance was defined in two ways. First, attendance was considered to have improved if higher attendance rates for FIRST students were observed compared to similar at-risk students. A second way of defining improved attendance was to compare rates for the 1990-91 school year to rates in 1989-90. Participation in FIRST was also hoped to raise student achievement. Staff indicated in interviews that, for the purposes of the program, improved achievement would be reflected by

FIRST students' performing better than similar students both on standardized tests and grade point averages.

The performance of FIRST students was compared to at-risk ninth graders at another District high school. The school was selected for comparative purposes because it has similar enrollment size and demographic characteristics to Crockett. The two groups were not exactly the same demographically. The FIRST group was predominantly male (73%) while the comparison group is more equally divided between male (55%) and female (45%). The FIRST group was 51% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 39% Other, while the comparison group was 34% Hispanic, 37% Black, and 29% Other. Even with these differences a comparison between the two groups is valuable. The comparison group provides a comparative group of similar students that are not at Crockett High School. In addition, the school represents the best overall match in terms of school size, location, and demographics.

FIRST student performance was also compared to other at-risk ninth graders at Crockett High School. The program did not include all Crockett ninth graders. Students were recommended for participation by their middle/junior high school counselors, their ninth grade teachers after the first few weeks of school, or because they were on the District at-risk list. This list contains students who are at-risk for a variety of reasons including:

- o Being overage for grade,
- o Scoring two or more years below grade level on a norm-referenced standardized achievement test,
- o Failing two or more courses during one semester,
- o Failing any section of the most recently administered state-mandated minimum skills test, or
- o A combination of the above categories.

There were no set selection criteria, and students had the option of participating or not. This self-selection process may have had an impact on student performance.

Baseline information is also included on at-risk Crockett ninth graders for the 1988-89 and 1989-90 school years. This information is provided to demonstrate the demographic and performance characteristics of Crockett at-risk students before the implementation of FIRST.

Dropouts and Attendance

The dropout rate for at-risk Crockett ninth graders has been increasing since the 1988-89 school year. In 1988-89, the dropout rate was 12.4%. In 1989-90, the dropout rate rose to 13.4%, and in 1990-91, it rose again to 19% at the end of the sixth six weeks. **FIRST students had a dropout rate of 6.8% at the end of the sixth six weeks. This is well below the rate of the population of at-risk ninth graders at Crockett.** The comparison

group's dropout rate was greater than the rates of both the FIRST students and Crockett at-risk students, at 22% at the end of the sixth six weeks. **Participation in the FIRST project appears to have had a positive impact on student dropout rates.**

In terms of attendance, at-risk Crockett ninth graders have basically maintained the same rates from the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year. The fall, 1989 rate was 82%, spring, 1990 was 78%, fall, 1990 was 82%, and spring, 1991 was 84%. FIRST students' attendance rates were greater than Crockett at-risk ninth graders in both the fall, 1990 (92%) and spring, 1991 (90%) semesters. The comparison group attendance rates for fall, 1990 and spring, 1991 were 78% and 76%, respectively. Attendance rates for both the FIRST students and the comparison group were lower in the 1990-91 school year than in 1989-90 school year. However, FIRST students had a 6% decline in attendance from 1989-90 to 1990-91, while the comparison group's decline in attendance was 9%. Attendance rates for all groups are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
ATTENDANCE RATES FOR FIRST STUDENTS AND COMPARISON GROUPS FOR THE 1989-90 AND 1990-91 SCHOOL YEARS

GROUP	FALL 1989	SPRING 1990	FALL 1990	SPRING 1991
FIRST	96%	93%	92%	90%
COMPARISON	85%	80%	78%	76%

Findings with respect to FIRST students' attendance are mixed. **FIRST students' attendance rates declined from the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year.** FIRST students did have higher attendance rates for the 1990-91 school year than students in the comparison group, but the FIRST students had higher attendance rates in the 1989-90 school year, before their participation in the project. The attendance rates of both the FIRST students and comparison students declined from 1989-90 to 1990-91. **However, the extent of the decrease was less for the FIRST students than for the comparison students.** Therefore, the program may have had some effect in slowing the rate of decline in attendance among program students.

Achievement

Student performance on standardized tests was examined as a measure of school success. Ninth-grade students in AISD take the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP). TAP consists of subtests in Reading Comprehension, Mathematics, Written Expression, Social Studies, Science, and Using Sources of Information. The Office of Research and Evaluation has designed a special set of computer programs called the Generic Evaluation System (GENESYS) to gather outcome information on programs of interest. Part of the GENESYS analyses is the Report on Program Effectiveness (ROPE). A regression analysis, ROPE is a statistical manipulation of test scores that yields a prediction of how the students should score on achievement tests based on students districtwide with similar characteristics, including the following:

- o Previous achievement level,
- o Age,
- o Sex,
- o Ethnicity,
- o Estimate of family income,
- o Whether or not the student received a free or reduced-price lunch,
- o Whether or not the student was reassigned, and
- o The average pupil-teacher ratio for the student's grade at his/her school.

Some at-risk characteristics (such as failing two or more courses during one semester, or failing any section of the most recently administered state-mandated minimum skills test) are not part of the prediction in the ROPE analysis.

A measure of program effectiveness is made by comparing the students' actual performance relative to the prediction. The tests used for the ROPE are Reading Comprehension, Mathematics, Written Expression (Language), and Using Sources of Information (Work-Study). The ROPE analysis was performed on the FIRST students, the other at-risk ninth graders at Crockett, and the comparison students (see Figure 2).

In the spring of 1991, FIRST students scored below the ninth-grade level on all tests. (Students would be expected to score at the 9.8 grade equivalent on the tests to be considered on grade level.) Students' scores were significantly less than predicted levels on all subtests except Work-Study. However, FIRST students' scores did improve by one grade level between 1989-90 and 1990-91 on all subtests except Language, an improvement paralleled by other at-risk ninth graders at Crockett. The comparison group did not score at the ninth-grade level on any subtests, and only on Work-Study did these students' scores improve by one grade level from 1989-90 to 1990-91. The comparison group's test scores were also significantly below predicted levels except on Work-Study (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
FIRST STUDENTS' AND COMPARISON GROUP'S GRADE EQUIVALENT PERFORMANCE ON TAP 1989-90 AND 1990-91

ROPE, SPRING 1990 TO SPRING 1991 MEAN GRADE EQUIVALENT

	FIRST	CROCKETT AT-RISK	COMPARISON
READING COMPREHENSION			
Number of Students	75	111	56
1990 Grade Equivalent	8.0	7.9	7.4
1991 Grade Equivalent	9.0	8.8	8.1
Gain	1.0	1.0	0.7
Over/Under Predicted	-.5	-.4	-.5
Program Effectiveness	-	-	-
Range for 0 (+/-)	0.4	0.4	0.5
MATHEMATICS			
Number of Students	74	109	56
1990 Grade Equivalent	8.1	7.8	7.4
1991 Grade Equivalent	9.1	8.5	8.1
Gain	1.0	0.8	0.8
Over/Under Predicted	-.6	-.5	-.4
Program Effectiveness	-	-	-
Range for 0 (+/-)	0.4	0.3	0.4
LANGUAGE			
Number of Students	72	115	55
1990 Grade Equivalent	8.2	8.0	7.9
1991 Grade Equivalent	8.6	8.3	8.4
Gain	0.4	0.3	0.5
Over/Under Predicted	-.6	-.7	-.5
Program Effectiveness	-	-	-
Range for 0 (+/-)	0.4	0.3	0.5
WORK STUDY			
Number of Students	75	103	52
1990 Grade Equivalent	8.1	7.8	7.2
1991 Grade Equivalent	9.6	9.0	8.5
Gain	1.5	1.2	1.3
Over/Under Predicted	-.3	-.4	-.2
Program Effectiveness	0	-	0
Range for 0 (+/-)	0.4	0.4	0.5

Based on the ROPE analysis, the FIRST project did not have a positive impact because these students did not achieve predicted test score gains. The FIRST students scored below predicted levels on all TAP subtests; however, they did gain at least one year on all subtests except Language. The comparison group did not gain one year on any subtest except Work-Study.

Grade point average

Crockett at-risk students had grade point averages (GPA) above the passing level for both the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years. In both fall, 1989 and spring, 1990, these students had a GPA of 68%. For the 1990-91 school year, their GPA was 70% for both the fall and spring semesters. FIRST students' GPA was 78% in fall, 1990 and 76% in spring, 1991. The comparison group's GPA for the 1990-91 school year was 68% for both semesters. **FIRST students had a higher GPA than both other at-risk Crockett ninth graders and similar students at the comparison school.** Because grade point averages for the eighth-grade year for FIRST students are unknown, program impact on GPA is inconclusive.

CONCLUSIONS

The FIRST project seems to have met its goal of lowering the dropout rate of program participants. FIRST students had higher attendance rates than similar students in the 1990-91 school year; however, they also had higher attendance rates for the 1989-90 school year, before program implementation. While FIRST student attendance rates declined from the 1989-90 to the 1990-91 school year, the rate of decline was less than that of similar students. FIRST student achievement was below predicted levels on standardized achievement tests, but the FIRST students did have greater gains than similar students. The awarding of incentives may have impacted student performance. In interviews, teachers noted that the students liked the material rewards offered through the program. Students may have also benefited by the special attention and adjusted curriculum offered by the teachers in the program.

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